Paper Tiger Credentials

Without the familiar college degree to hold out to society, or even a two year associate degree, massage therapists are starving for credentials to give their work public credibility. As massage therapy becomes more valued in this society and sought out by prospective clients, meaningful credentials will be very important to identify practitioners with basic knowledge, skills, abilities and competency in various disciplines or specialties.

A few states have licensing which offers the credential "licensed massage therapist," and many practitioners have diplomas and certification from training programs of various lengths and content. But a growing problem within the field is the proliferation of what I will call "paper tiger" credentials, or titles and certifications which may sound impressive but which lack "teeth." A credential is only as good as the standards, education or training it represents.

A disturbing number of practitioners are claiming credentials in various disciplines or specialties after only an introductory workshop or a few class hours in the subject. Likewise there are school approvals available upon request with nothing required but a sign-up application.

If a credential is to mean something of value it must represent meeting a certain standard of quality or the significant mastery of a particular area, and not just a passing familiarity. These "paper tigers" cheapen the value of all of our credentials, especially to our colleagues in the health field and to an educated public.

In a materialistic culture which confuses "having" with "being," it is not surprising that some will confuse the paper on the wall with the competency it purports to symbolize. We often give disproportionate value to the "piece of paper" framed for display without thought about what it really means or represents.

So official looking on the wall
Proud and full of promise
The gold seal of authority
Paper tiger credentials
So colorful – but no teeth.

Illustration: Shane Fox

Displaying credentials is an ethical matter. The AMTA Code of Ethics mandates as acceptable ethical professional behavior that massage therapists shall "represent their education, certifications, professional affiliations and other qualifications honestly." We need much soul searching, deep thought and discussion to make a judgment about what "honestly" really means in this instance.

There is no one policing credentials (except for state licensing) and no clear well known standards for how much training equals certification. There are, however, some general guidelines that you can use to make decisions about which credentials you can honestly lay claim to and ways to make clear just what your credentials represent.

For example, professional educators are starting to distinguish between "certification" and "certificate" programs. The term certification is being reserved for those programs designed to test for competency (e.g. The National Certification Program for Massage Therapists) or educational programs of sufficient length to ensure competency in a particular area. So, for example, a school may honestly "certify" a professional massage therapist after 500 hours of training, since that is a widely recognized professional standard.

The term certificate program is being used for trainings of shorter duration, e.g., a weekend workshop or a one day seminar. The thought is that the length of involvement with the subject is shorter and that true competency develops over a longer period of time. So instead of calling it certification, the training is represented by a certificate of completion. The certificate simply verifies that the practitioner has completed a workshop or seminar of a certain length.

REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

This does not make shorter trainings less valid, they simply don't warrant receiving a credential. Sometimes after a series of these shorter certificate programs in a specific subject, certification (the credential) is awarded for the extended study and the competency that developed over a period of time.

Another way to clarify the situation in addition to distinguishing between certification and certificate programs, is to be sure the number of hours of training is clearly stated on any document displayed to the public. Schools and individual teachers can provide this for practitioners.

Some professional organizations (e.g. American Polarity Therapy Association) are working on establishing standards of certification for their particular disciplines within the larger field of bodywork. Such nonprofit professional associations representing the leadership in their particular areas are a good source of guidance on what constitutes sufficient training in their specialty to warrant a credential.

Individual practitioners, schools, teachers and professional associations can all help to strengthen the credentials in massage therapy. Practitioners can refuse to display credentials they feel are misleading, i.e., in their advertising, on their walls and on business cards. Schools and teachers can be more clear about the depth of their training programs, and professional associations can be sure that their certifications reflect high standards.

Some of our AMTA programs are currently under study for revision and improvement. The AMTA Commission on Massage Training Accreditation is currently developing strong standards for accreditation of professional education programs. The ACE Instructor and the Registered Massage Therapist Programs are both temporarily suspended pending further study. The Sports Massage Certification Program is continuously being revised to remain state-of-the-art.

We are also trying to send out a clear message that Active Membership status does not constitute certification from the AMTA nor is the membership entrance exam a certification test. It is merely one avenue of determining minimum standards for membership eligibility (see *MTJ*, Spring 1990). We are also investing tremendous resources in the National Certification Program for Massage Therapists to be sure that it is of the highest possible quality.

As your professional association, the AMTA is striving to set an example for honesty and high standards in our own educational programs. We are committed to providing strong credentials, so that you can display any AMTA certificate honestly and proudly.

Patricia J. Benjamin
National Director of Education
Chicago, Illinois